

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application.

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (canceled)
2. (previously presented) The server according to claim 7, wherein:  
the device for notifying is configured to select the one or more virtual game players from the virtual game player list, and to send the selected virtual game players' names to the actual game players; and  
the selected number of virtual game players equals a number of actual game players lacking from the competitive game.
3. (canceled)
4. (previously presented) The program storage medium according to claim 8, wherein the instructions for performing the method further comprise:  
selecting the one or more virtual game players from the virtual game player list, and sending the selected virtual game players' names to the actual game players; and  
the selected number of virtual game players equals a number of actual game players lacking from the competitive game.
5. (canceled)

6. (previously presented) The method of claim 9, wherein the notification step includes:

selecting the one or more virtual game players from the virtual game player list, wherein the selected number of virtual game players equals a number of actual game players lacking from the competitive game; and

sending the selected virtual game players' names to the actual game players.

7. (currently amended) A server, operating with a competitive game program and a virtual game player list, and being configured for use on a network supporting a competitive game service for a number of actual game players to competitively play with one another, comprising:

a ~~device for activating~~ system for operating one or more virtual game players, configured such that when ~~an~~ a given actual game player of a plurality of available actual game players receives the competitive game service, and the number of the plurality of available actual game players ~~available to competitively play~~ is below a predetermined number, the system ~~competitive game program~~ is activated to operate as ~~at least one or more~~ virtual game players, ~~each provided with different thinking routines~~, selected from the virtual game player list, each virtual game player of the one or more virtual game players being provided with a different thinking routine, wherein the system is operative to operate the one or more virtual game players to competitively play with the actual game players on the competitive game service; and

a ~~device-system~~ for notifying the given actual game players ~~player~~ of the availability of ~~the selected~~ game players to competitively play by sending a mail message that preparation for a game is completed after connection between the server and the given actual game players ~~player~~ is discontinued temporally even if the ~~device for activating~~ ~~selects at least~~ system for operating ~~operates the one or more~~ virtual game players to competitively play, the ~~device~~ system for notifying being configured such that the one or more virtual game players appear to the plurality of available actual game players as actual game players.

8. (currently amended) A program storage medium for use ~~in~~ with a server, the server operating with a competitive game program and a virtual game player list on a network supporting a competitive game service for ~~a number of~~ actual game players to competitively play with one another, the program storage medium having computer-executable instructions for performing a method comprising:

activating the competitive game program to operate as ~~at least one~~ or more virtual game players, ~~each provided with different thinking routines,~~ selected from the virtual game player list, each virtual game player of the one or more virtual game players being provided with a different thinking routine, being conditioned on the event that ~~an a given~~ actual game player of a plurality of available actual game players receives the competitive game service and the number of the plurality of available actual game players ~~available to competitively play~~ is below a predetermined number, wherein the one or more virtual game players competitively play with ~~the~~ actual game players on the competitive game service; and

notifying the given actual game ~~players~~ player of the availability of ~~the selected~~ game players to competitively play by sending a mail message that preparation for a game is completed after connection between the server and the given actual game ~~players~~ player is discontinued temporally even if the ~~device for activating selects at least~~ program operates the one or more virtual game players to competitively play, wherein the one or more virtual game players appear to the plurality of available actual game players as actual game players.

9. (currently amended) A method for providing ~~at least one~~ or more virtual game players on a network supporting a competitive game service for ~~a number of~~ actual game players to competitively play with one another, comprising:

activating a competitive game program to operate as ~~at least one~~ or more virtual game players, ~~each provided with different thinking routines~~, selected from a virtual game player list, each virtual game player of the one or more virtual game players being provided with a different thinking routine, the step of activating being conditioned on the event that ~~an~~ a given actual game player of a plurality of available actual game players receives the competitive game service, and the number of the plurality of available actual game players ~~available to competitively play~~ is below a predetermined number, wherein the one or more virtual game players competitively play with ~~the~~ actual game players on the competitive game service; and

notifying the given actual game ~~players~~ player of the availability of ~~the selected~~ game players to competitively play by sending a mail message that preparation for a game is completed after connection between ~~the~~ a server on the network and the given actual game ~~players~~ player is discontinued even if the ~~device for activating selects at least~~ program operates the one or more virtual game players to competitively play, wherein the one or more virtual game players appear to the plurality of available actual game players as actual game players.

10. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the competitive game program is configured to support playing, as a two-player competitive game, one or more games selected from the group of: mah-jong, shogi, igo, chess and othello.

11. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the competitive game program is configured to support playing a tournament composed of a plurality of the same kinds of games.

12. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the device for notifying is configured to select a virtual game player of a player class similar to that of an actual game player to be notified.

13. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the device for activating is configured such that actual game players may review their games after such games are completed.

14. (canceled)

15. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the device for activating is configured to provide game players with a training program to develop their playing skills.

16. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the device for notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players provides information that preparation for a game is completed excluding any information that presented competitors are virtual players.

17. (previously presented) The server of claim 7, wherein the device for notifying the actual game players of the availability of the selected virtual game players provides as much information as in a case that presented competitors are actual game players such that the virtual game players appear to the actual game players as other actual game players.

18. (previously presented) The program storage medium of claim 8, wherein the step of notifying includes providing information that preparation for a game is completed excluding information that presented competitors are virtual players set in accordance with the competitive game program.

19. (previously presented) The program storage medium of claim 8, wherein the step of notifying includes providing as much information as in a case that presented competitors are actual game players.

20. (previously presented) The method of claim 9, wherein the step of notifying includes providing information that preparation for a game is completed excluding information that presented competitors are virtual players set in accordance with the competitive game program.

21. (previously presented) The method of claim 9, wherein the step of notifying includes providing as much information as in a case that presented competitors are actual game players.